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Re-conceptualizing China in our Time: From a Chinese Perspective

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China as a concept had not been put under much scrutiny and challenge until the recent postmodern and postcolonial theoretical discourse on nation and nationhood, and the radical scepticism about tradition and homogeneity. Some scholars have questioned whether China could have been a nation state before there was any nation state in Europe, and others have challenged the very notions of China and Chineseness. How do the Chinese themselves respond to such scepticism and challenge? How does one re-conceptualize China at the present time? By drawing on recent debates on such important issues, this essay tries to find some answers and offers some views from a Chinese perspective, while fully engaging Western theoretical discourses, to attempt an international dialogue and meaningful exchange.

China, Asia, the world – these are concepts and terms much discussed today as we live in an increasingly globalized world, in which the rise of China in economic strength and political power is getting all the attention from almost every corner of the earth. At the same time, China is also being drawn into discussions of cultural, economic, and geopolitical interrelations of regional and global dimensions. For most Chinese scholars, the concept of China is hardly a question as it provides an immediate presence and constitutes the very environment in which their scholarly work is carried out. And yet, on closer inspection, there are many issues one may explore in various ways with regard to China as a concept – its territories and borderlines, migration and merging of its racial and ethnic components, their costumes and diets, languages and dialects, habits and customs, ideas, values, and beliefs, and so on, all of which have undergone many changes throughout history. China is not one simple and fixed entity diachronically or synchronically, but a changing entity and therefore a changing concept. On the other hand, however, China has a long and continuous recorded history that dates back more than three thousand years ago, to the pre-Qin and the Han dynasties; its territory may have been different in shape and size in its border regions in different historical periods, but its central regions have remained relatively stable, and it has a unified written language, which has a strong cohesive force and

makes it possible for its vast population to stay within the same 'linguistic community' despite the diversity of their spoken languages and dialects, and which also makes it possible for its modern readers to read their ancient classics in the original across the huge temporal gap of thousands of years. It is therefore not surprising that most Chinese, particularly Chinese intellectuals, would have a strong sense of history and tradition; they do not question the veracity of China as a culture, a nation, and a state, which for them is hardly an 'imagined community.'

The Theoretical Challenge from the West

The term 'imagined community' of course comes from the title of Benedict Anderson's celebrated book on the origin and spread of nationalism, a book that has become so successful that its main title has almost displaced its detailed argument and created a misleading impression that nations are nothing but 'imagined communities.' Anderson's book, as Harish Trivedi observes, 'has set the terms of contemporary discourse on the subject, and its title, *Imagined Communities*, has prompted many readers (and non-readers) of that book to believe that the nation is, somehow, a less than real entity.'[1] This impression has put the nation in question in Western theoretical discourse, and it is indeed scholars in the West, particularly in American universities, who have first raised the issue of China as a concept for theoretical questioning.

For example, in her introduction to a volume of essays on modern Chinese literary and cultural studies published by Duke University Press in 2000, Rey Chow put up the notion of 'Chineseness' for a theoretical interrogation. The word 'Chinese' has been frequently used without conscious reflection, 'untheorized and taken for granted', she says. But in the 1990s, according to Rey Chow, some 'alternative forces' had emerged to affect 'a gradual epistemic shift' that started to 'modify the claim of a homogeneously unified, univocal China'. Such 'alternative forces' encouraged 'studies of China's minority populations (e.g. the Huis, or Chinese Muslims), continual demands for the liberation of Tibet, intermittent protests from Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, repeated assertions of political and national autonomy by Taiwan, and concerted efforts for democratic government and the rule of law in post-British Hong Kong.'[2] These are all sensitive issues with volatile political implications, and these 'alternative forces' tended to 'deconstruct' China and Chineseness with all the discursive power of postmodern and postcolonial theories. Such theoretical interrogations focused on issues of minority identities or ethnicities, and questioned the concept of China as a unified nation. Characteristic of postmodern theoretical protocols with a 'linguistic turn', Chow first contemplated the issue of language and challenged the authority of the 'common language' or 'Mandarin' as an arbitrarily constructed notion beyond different dialects and the various minority languages. She predicted that Chinese officials and scholars would have to face 'the polyphony of these other speeches and their respective ethnicities', and have to 'respond to the plurality that has hitherto been suppressed under the myth of "standard Chinese".'[3]

With interests in ethnic minorities in the border regions, their languages, customs, and cultural values, these kinds of research resemble the study of Chinese western

regions, or study of the ethnic minorities in China – the Manchus, the Mongolians, the Chinese Muslims, the Tibetans, and the Koreans – in which Western and Japanese Orientalists were actively engaged in the late 19th and the early 20th century. What makes Rey Chow's 'alternative forces' in the 1990s different from the old-fashioned Oriental studies is their research methodology and theoretical underpinnings, for these new efforts, unlike the old Oriental studies, do not build their claims on the basis of philology, archaeology, historiography, geography, or archival work, but are guided by contemporary Western theories, as clearly indicated by the book's subtitle – 'Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory'. What these 'alternative forces' share with old Oriental studies, particularly of the Japanese type, however, is the tendency to de-Sinicize, that is, to deconstruct China as a unified country and to challenge Chineseness as a viable identity.

What Rey Chow calls 'alternative forces' is alternative to the mainstream of Western Sinology and it refers, more specifically, to intellectuals who are writing from the theoretical perspective of postcolonial diasporas. 'Chineseness', as Rey Chow says in an earlier book, 'lies at the root of a violence which works by the most deeply ingrained feelings of "bonding" and which – even at the cost of social alienation – diasporic intellectuals must collectively resist.'[4] Diaspora is a crucial concept. 'Indeed, migration, exile, diaspora, and hybridity have been among the most widely theorized issues in postcolonial theory', as Trivedi observes. 'It is, however, the voluntary migration of the Third World postcolonial intellectuals to the First World which has almost exclusively defined the parameters of this debate, with relatively little attention paid so far to the much larger and wider subaltern diaspora of indigent labourers and farm-workers.'[5] Some interesting differences exist between diasporic intellectuals from India and from China, for those intellectuals who have voluntarily migrated from India to the United States mostly speak or claim to speak for the subalterns and represent India as a colony oppressed by the British, but those who speak about China as diasporic intellectuals often have a much more ambivalent and even antagonistic relationship with China and the Chinese.

In much of the 19th and the 20th centuries, China was poor and weak as a country, thus Chinese immigrants and their posterity living in other countries often suffered horrible discrimination, so much so that to be identified as Chinese was anything but desirable or advantageous. In fact, Chineseness might be seen as a stigma, a burden, and at times even a danger when the ethnic majorities in those countries started to make scapegoats out of Chinese immigrants and their descendants for economic woe or political unrest. In several Southeast Asian countries, particularly in Indonesia, anti-Chinese riots and social upheavals were by no means rare, so it is quite understandable that Ien Ang, who was born in Indonesia and knows very well the danger and shame of being a Chinese, would look at the concept of Chineseness with a strong aversion. From the position of a diasporic intellectual armed with postcolonial theories, she set out to deconstruct China as an imagined centre in a radical discourse of diasporic dispersal, in which 'the very validity of the category of Chineseness is in question, its status as a signifier of identity thrown into radical doubt.'[6] She rejected Tu Weiming's idea of 'cultural China' and Leo Lee's 'self-chosen marginality'

between China and the United States, because neither of these had truly severed ties from China as an imagined centre.

Indeed, what purchase does 'Chineseness' have for those Chinese descendants who live in places far from China, speaking no Chinese, and having no relations whatever with China for generations? For Ang, the last vestiges of skin colour, facial traits, and blood relationship are nothing but what Rey Chow calls the 'myth of consanguinity.'[7] Such a myth is repressive for diasporic intellectuals, and Ang proves this by drawing on her own personal experience. She told the story of how she encountered such repression when she was taking a taxi in Sydney, where she is a distinguished university professor, and the driver happened to be a man from mainland China. The driver recognized her as 'Chinese', and she had to tell him that she didn't speak Chinese. 'Well,' that driver said, 'it will be easy for you to learn. After all, you have Chinese blood.' Socially speaking, a cab driver can hardly be said to possess a higher position than his passenger as a middle-class academic, and what the driver said was perhaps without any malice, but Ang felt resentful when she gave the cab driver's simple remark a theoretical interpretation. 'In the imagining of "the Chinese race",' she argues, 'differences that have been constructed by heterogeneous diasporic conditions and experiences are suppressed in favour of illusory modes of bonding and belonging.'[8] For diasporic intellectuals as 'citizens of the world,' she argues, 'there is no necessary advantage in a Chinese identification here; indeed, depending on context and necessity, it may be politically mandatory to refuse the primordial interpellation of belonging to the largest race of the world, the 'family' of 'the Chinese people'. In such situations,' she declares, 'the significant question is not only, Can one say no to China? but also, Can one, when called for, say no to Chineseness?'[9] The answers to such rhetorical questions are of course a resounding *yes*, and thus the tendency to reject China and deconstruct Chineseness constitutes the 'epistemic shift' Rey Chow calls for in Western China studies. However, the alleged emergence of 'alternative forces' and an 'epistemic shift' presumed to have taken place in the field of China studies are probably greatly exaggerated, but there is no denying that the interrogation of China and Chineseness within the framework of Western postmodern and postcolonial theories does represent a certain new orientation in China studies in the US and in the West at large.

In all the efforts to deconstruct China and Chineseness, Allen Chun from Taiwan surely stood out with his article published in *boundary 2* with a sensational title – 'Fuck Chineseness'. In American scholarly journals, such a title is certainly a rarity, for even in a journal like *boundary 2*, one can hardly find a title with similar obscenities. Chun maintains that the idea that all Chinese belong to the same nation is false, because China as a whole is 'certainly not ethnically homogeneous'. Ethnic homogeneity, however, can hardly be said to characterize any nation in the world, but Chun's strategy is first to reduce all Chinese to the Han ethnicity, and then deny China as a nation because the Chinese is not just Han and ethnically not homogeneous. 'Prior to the Nationalist Revolution in 1911,' Chun claims, 'there was no cognate notion in Chinese of society or nation as a polity whose boundary was synonymous with that of an ethnic group.'[10] As we shall see, this statement is

contradictory to historical evidence, but Chun's claim is based on the misunderstood concept of 'imagined communities,' for he took all such notions as nation, identity, and culture for nothing but imaginaries. 'Since the very idea of (a national) identity is new,' he says, 'any notions of *culture* invoked in this regard, no matter how faithfully they are grounded in the past, have to be *constructions* by nature.'[11] Indeed, the Western nation-state is thought to be a modern product after the Renaissance and the Reformation. 'The modern state is a sovereign state,' says Immanuel Wallerstein. 'Sovereignty is a concept that was invented in the modern world-system.'[12] Wallerstein's definitions of nation-state and sovereignty are totally based on his understanding of European history, but should these be universally applicable to other parts of the world, to the historical and social conditions of China?

For those who intend to deconstruct China and Chineseness, such Western concepts offer a sort of theoretical equipment remarkably useful for their purposes, and following such concepts, they argue that China in the past could not be a nation-state, and that a unified traditional China could only be an 'imagined community.' How could it be otherwise, since a nation-state did not even exist in the West until the 16th century? By using Western concepts as universal criteria, Allen Chun's argument basically boils down to the claim that China is a repressive and imaginary construct; if there is anything special about his article, it is his deliberate use of the word 'fuck' at the beginning of his article, as the first word in the title, and also the word with which he brings the article to a close: 'How can one not give a fuck?'[13] But what significance could such use of obscenities have other than to create a melodramatic, attention-grabbing effect, and to cater to the taste of certain political forces in Taiwan in their effort to de-Sinicize Taiwan and to gain political power?

There may be many reasons why some Chinese in diasporic conditions may want to get rid of the burden of a Chinese identity or to debunk the 'myth of consanguinity', for they are far away from China, sick of the ills of racial discrimination, anxious to be assimilated into the local society, or, as diasporic intellectuals, they are eager to excel in the command of Western theoretical discourses in an academic environment. All these are understandable, and all these are perfectly legitimate choices of self-identity, but such choices of identity become not just a kind of narcissistic self-infatuation, but can become themselves repressive when self-assertive personal experiences and sentiments originated in diasporic conditions are empowered by the authority of Western theories and form a conceptual framework to deconstruct China as an 'imagined community' in and from the West. The irony is that once theorized in the West, such notions as diaspora, periphery, hybridity, marginality and so on all become part of a Western theoretical discourse, that is, discourse from the global centre that carries power and authority in the global peripheries, including China, India, and the other parts of the non-Western world. We cannot forget how theoretical notions carry such discursive power in the context of global geopolitical reality today, and consequently how they may have different implications in the West as in the non-West. 'If the idea and practice of the nation is palpably different in the West from that in the rest of the world,' again as Trivedi observes, 'it is so probably because while the rise of nationalism in the West led to

colonization by it of other parts of the world, it was precisely this colonization that gave rise to nationalism in those other parts.'[14] Western theories are exerting a profound influence outside the West, including China, where intellectual debates often look to the West for theoretical backing, and therefore Western theories form a challenge to Chinese scholars and call for their responses.

'One of the distinctive characteristics of cultural studies is its recognition of the positionality of any mode of intellectual practice or style of knowledge production,' says Ien Ang. 'Such a recognition implies a de-universalization of knowledge and an emphasis on the particular historical and cultural coordinates that inform the enunciation of discourse and the formation of knowledge.'[15] What this high-sounding remark boils down to is the simple idea that anyone's knowledge and argument are closely related to this person's position in some specific historical, cultural, and social circumstances. According to this concept of 'positionality', then, someone with lived experiences in Java, Amsterdam, Sydney, New York or some other American metropolis would produce knowledge and form argument conditioned by, and congruent with, such local conditions. That makes sense, of course, but such a notion of 'positionality' seems to tie one's knowledge and thoughts too tightly to one's living condition and material circumstances, so much so that it reminds us of Ludwig Feuerbach's often derided idea that '*Der Mensch ist, was er ißt*.' It also runs counter to the liberating effect so often touted in cultural studies and suppresses the very possibility of multiple ideas and diverse views generated under the same social and cultural conditions. In fact, when we chip away at the obscurity and mystique of theoretical terminology, we may see clearly that the concept of 'positionality' serves to legitimize the discourse of diasporic intellectuals and empower their deconstruction of the centre from a position on the 'margin' or 'periphery.'

As a theoretical concept, however, 'positionality' should not be the monopoly of diasporic intellectuals as academic stars in American or Australian universities; it should also empower people in other locales and legitimize *their* knowledge and argument, for each person – even a diasporic cab driver in Sydney – has his or her position in a given social condition. What would be the knowledge and argument produced by scholars in China as a 'periphery' vis-à-vis the West as centre and Western theories produced in the centre? Put it this way, the concept of 'positionality' would enable Chinese scholars to realize how futile and self-defeating it is to apply Western theoretical notions in a servile manner to the very different social, political and cultural conditions in China, and how important it is to come up with their own views and 'positions' based on their own living conditions and their lived experiences. Theory has its moment of origination in a specific locale, but it also has the tendency to transcend itself in search of universal applicability. The postmodern and postcolonial claim to 'de-universalization' of knowledge is necessarily disingenuous, because postmodern and postcolonial theories are circulating far beyond the West, not just theorizing on diasporic conditions and experiences in the West or Southeast Asia, but also forming the basis to deconstruct China and Chineseness from the outside, from the West. Such is the inevitable self-contradiction that would befall any theory that professes to do away with theoretical universality.

From a Chinese perspective, then, what would be the knowledge and argument produced in China in response to the questions raised in the West concerning China, Asia, and the world? What would be the intellectual discourse put forward by a Chinese scholar who recognizes China as a complicated and historically changing concept, but does not as a consequence doubt its existence as a social reality and cultural tradition, and does not have the kind of embarrassment or oscillation often associated with a diasporic position? How does such a scholar think and speak independently, drawing on the intellectual tradition as well as lived experience of his or her own, in the exchange and dialogue with international scholarly communities?

A Response from China

In my view, a recent book by Ge Zhaoguang, a distinguished Chinese scholar and intellectual historian, offers an illuminating example of a Chinese response to all those questions raised above. The book has a significant title, *Zhai zi Zhongguo* 宅兹中國, a phrase taken from the inscription on an early Western Zhou dynasty bronze vessel dating back more than three thousand years, which includes one of the earliest appearances of the term *Zhongguo*, now commonly translated as China; so the book title can be roughly rendered as 'building my house here in China', or, as I shall henceforth refer to it, *Here in China I Dwell*. Although the term *Zhongguo* in this ancient phrase does not quite mean the same as China in later times, there are undeniable philological connections between the two in the historical process of semantic change. With a title taken from an ancient bronze vessel inscription, Ge's book imparts a ponderous sense of history and a highly symbolic meaning, clearly signalling the author's position as a Chinese scholar with a specific stance and horizon located in China. The term *Zhongguo* with the literal sense of 'the centre of all under heaven' has a long history from the early forms of oracle bone scripts and bronze inscriptions to later standardized characters written with a brush. From the *Classic of Poetry* to *Zuo's Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annuals* and the *Mencius*, the term *Zhongguo* appears in more than 30 pre-Qin classical texts, often in contrast to four kinds of *yi* or barbarians. Having examined many examples in an article on the concept of *Zhongguo* or China in ancient texts, Huang Junjie comes to this conclusion:

> The word '*Zhongguo*' as seen in ancient Chinese classics indicates that in geographical terms, China was located at the center of the world, the four corners outside China to the east, west, south, and north were border regions. In political terms, China was the area of kingly rule, so the 'Canon of Yao' in the *Classic of History* recorded that after coming to the throne, Emperors Yao and Shun all went on a tour of inspection of the four border regions, and what lied beyond the borders was occupied by the ferocious and the barbarian, outside the kingly rule. In cultural terms, China occupied the center of the civilized world, while areas outside China were uncivilized, thus called pejoratively *man*, *yi*, *rong*, and *di* or the four barbarians.[16]

Such opposition between the civilized and the barbarian was indeed as old as human civilization, and by no means unique to China. The ancient Greeks also

thought of themselves as residing at the centre of the civilized world, while all those who could not speak the Greek language were barbarians. Such ethnocentric ideas in cultural and racial terms were common prejudices in human history, and China, which exerted a significant influence on the entire region of East Asia in very early times, with its writing system and different schools of thought adopted by the Koreans and the Japanese, established its position very early as the geographical, political, and cultural centre in East Asia. Chinese history, i.e. the history of China in geographical, political and cultural terms, is much longer than the history of modern nation-states in Europe.

Facing the challenging question of whether ancient China can be considered a nation-state by the conceptual yardstick of the modern Western nation-state, Ge Zhaoguang made a clear statement:

> Different from Europe, the political territory and cultural space of China spread from the center to the peripheries. Not to mention the legendary three dynasties, but since the time of the Qin and the Han, under the policies of 'unifying the tracks of chariots, unifying the writing scripts, and unifying the ethical codes of behavior,' language and writing, moral customs and political institutions began to stabilize the nation gradually in this space, which is quite different from the European understanding of nation as a new phenomenon in human history. Therefore, the theory that divides traditional empires and modern states into different time periods does not correspond to Chinese history, nor does it correspond to the Chinese consciousness of the state or the history of the formation of the state.[17]

In fact, not just ancient China, but also ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, Persia and other such civilizations, none had formed relations with their border regions and neighbouring ethnicities without the differentiation of the inner and the outer, centre and periphery, the Self and the Other, and none had failed to mark the differences in terms of geographical borderlines, territories of effective political governance, and specific cultural identities. In Europe and North Africa, however, these ancient civilizations all declined and disappeared, fading into the blurred antiquity distant from the medieval time and the Renaissance, so European postmodern theory makes heavy weather of modernity and separates the modern nation-state strictly from pre-modern social institutions in history, putting a temporal mark on the modern nation-state as a product possible only after the 16th and the 17th centuries. It is indeed ironic that scholars armed with Western postmodern theories would use the concept of nation-state based on European history as a universal yardstick to measure non-European societies and deconstruct China and Chineseness, while professing their doubts about universalism.

If the concepts of borders and sovereignty, the consciousness of Self and Other, and the differentiation of racial and ethnic groups are all indications of the formation of a nation-state, then, such consciousness and the form of a nation had already appeared in China of the Song dynasty (960–1279) at the latest. Drawing on Chinese historical evidences, Ge Zhaoguang argues:

> A nation-state, which had clear borderlines to mark the territory and a sense of the Other to form an international relationship, already started in China since the Song

> dynasty, mainly because of the pressure from foreign countries with increasingly greater powers. This nation-state had a remarkably firm foundation for its cultural identity and historical tradition, a very deep and widely shared ethics of life, and a clear space of political governance; therefore, the spatiality and subjectivity of such a Chinese nation-state is not necessarily related to what is known as 'modernity' in the West.[18]

Here, 'spatiality' refers to China with its specific territories, while 'subjectivity' refers to the self-identity of the Chinese, i.e., their consciousness of being Chinese. These two concepts are closely linked; that is to say, the majority of people living and occupying a space on this land have a sense of themselves being Chinese, despite the various differences in ethnicity, language, region, habits and customs, and despite their different sense of residing at the centre or in the peripheries with regard to living conditions and cultural development. This is not unique to China, but is commonplace in most other countries as nations.

In ancient times, 'Chineseness' was first and foremost a cultural concept rather than a racial or ethnic one. 'In ancient conceptualization, there was another criterion to differentiate the Chinese and the four barbarians, and that criterion was not consanguinity, but culture,' says Qian Mu in his *Introduction to the History of Chinese Culture*. 'A clear evidence of cultural criteria dividing the Chinese and the barbarian lies in the well-known remark 'to treat the princes as barbarians if they follow the barbarian rituals, and treat the barbarians as Chinese if they come close to the way of the Chinese.' What is called culture here refers, more specifically, to a way of life and political institution,' says Qian Mu. 'China was the general name of city states based on an agrarian way of life, while all those not engaging in an agrarian society, nor forming a city state, were called barbarians.'[19] Yu Ying-shih also made a similar remark when he says: 'For Chinese concepts, culture is more important than nationalities. Whether it was "all under heaven" or "China," these were all inclusive cultural concepts in ancient times, transcending the simple boundaries of politics, race or ethnicity.'[20] A famous passage from the *Mencius* may provide classic evidence:

> Shun was a barbarian from the East as he was born in Zhufeng, moved to Fuxia, and died in Mingtiao. King Wen was a barbarian from the West as he was born in Qizhou and died in Biying. Their native places were far from one another for more than a thousand *li*'s, and their times were separated from one another for more than a thousand years, but when they had their ways in China, their deeds matched perfectly like the two halves of a tally. These two sage kings, one earlier and one later, held exactly the same standards.[21]

Both Shun and King Wen are revered cultural heroes in the Chinese tradition, and it is almost shocking to realize, as Mencius here claims, that they were originally 'barbarians'. It is important to note here that in terms of subjectivity, difference in race or ethnicity does not constitute an obstacle to Chinese identity, so Shun and King Wen could become sage kings in China, even though they were 'barbarians' from the East and the West respectively. In terms of spatiality, however, China remains fixed and stable, and it was only when they came to China and had 'their deeds matched

perfectly like the two halves of a tally' that they became cultural heroes in the Chinese tradition. 'As a country with a clearly marked central region,' as Ge Zhaoguang remarks, 'China of the ethnic Han started very early to have a sense of the borders of their space, and they identified themselves as belonging to this space as a nation-state even more clearly than those countries of a more homogeneous ethnicity, such as Japan and Korea.'[22] The Chinese subjectivity is closely linked with the spatiality of China with its territories clearly marked by borderlines. Territories may change in the border regions in different dynasties, but the centre remained relatively clear and stable; and that is what made China the empire it was with its marked space.

The two concepts of 'subjectivity' and 'spatiality' Ge Zhaoguang proposed are of paramount importance. The cultural concept of China with no emphasis on race or ethnicity had encouraged some Korean and Japanese scholars to declare, particularly after the demise of the Ming dynasty in the 17th century, that China had disappeared, and that true Chinese civilization had migrated to Korea or Japan. Huang Junjie remarks that 'in Japan of the Tokugawa period (1600–1868), the concept of "China" was appropriated to refer to Japan rather than to China proper, which was in line with the growth of Japanese subjectivity in the modern Japanese history of ideas.'[23] Yamaga Sokō (1622–1685), a scholar in Tokugawa Japan, argued that 'what is at the centre of the operations of heaven and earth, and at the juncture of the four seasons, would not get the extreme conditions of the wind and the rain, of the cold of winter or the heat of summer, thus having futility in its land and genius in its people, and that may be called China.' With such an argument, says Huang, Yamaga Sokō had 'deconstructed the old meaning of "China" in Chinese classics as referring to the Chinese empire as political and cultural centre, and successfully presented Japan as more qualified to be called "China" ' (literally the Central Kingdom) because Japan got to "the middle" culturally and politically, far superior to what was geographically the Empire of China.'[24]

Huang also quoted Sato Issai (1772–1859) as dissolving the specific meaning of 'China' with the universality of the word 'heaven', for Sato argued that 'the Way penetrates the infinite universe as one. From the human point of view, there is the difference between China and the barbarians, but from heaven's point of view, there is no such difference.' Huang remarks in summary that 'through such cross-cultural semantic changes, Tokugawa Japanese scholars like Yamaga Sokō could completely subvert the Chinese-barbarian order in the East Asian world and reconstruct the meaning of "China" as commonly found in Chinese classics, thus making Chinese Confucian classics acceptable by Japanese Confucians with their Japanese cultural upbringing.'[25] Such appropriation of Chinese terms with changed meanings, however, was taking advantage of the cultural meaning of the word 'China' to displace Chinese subjectivity with a Japanese one, but it totally neglected the 'spatiality' of China in geographical terms, and therefore it always struck one as forced. In fact, it is the combination of the culturally flexible, broad 'subjectivity' with the relatively fixed 'spatiality' in geographical and territorial terms that constitutes the conceptual core of China, for which neither of the two concepts can be dispensed. It was China in such a combination of 'subjectivity' and 'spatiality' that had become a nation-state long before nation-states were formed in Europe.

In his book, Ge Zhaoguang discussed the change from the Tang to the Song as a significant change from a cultural consciousness to an ethnic one. China did not face serious challenges either culturally or politically from the Han to the Tang, and thus the Chinese sense of superiority can be easily seen in such poetic lines from the *Classic of Poetry* that 'all under heaven, there is nowhere that is not the king's domain; / And in all the land and rivers, there is no one who is not the king's subject.' The ancient Chinese outlook was blatantly ethnocentric, for they thought of themselves as occupying the centre of the civilized world, and looking from the centre outwards, their world looked like 'a concentric square', as Ge describes: 'the first round was the capital where the king resided, the second was the place of the Chinese, and the third was where the barbarians lived.' While the centre was civilized, 'the closer the geographical space was toward the borderline, the more desolate and barren the place became, and the people living there were more barbaric, and less and less civilized, thus called the southern *man*, northern *di*, western *rong*, and eastern *yi*.'[26] As China developed very early, from which neighbouring countries such as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam adopted the writing system and the teachings of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, an East Asian civilization with China at the centre was formed in ancient history.

The Sinocentric outlook, however, already met its first challenge when Buddhism started to arrive in China in the later Han dynasty in the first century. The Buddhists held two views concerning space very different from that of the Chinese. 'The first was a more inclusive and integral view of the Buddhist world. The Buddhists understood the world not as a big mass with China at the centre, but as consisting of four big continents, in one of which China was located,' Ge observed.[27] 'The second was the Buddhist view of the world's centre. … Since Buddhism and its truth came from India, India was naturally the centre of world civilization.'[28] However, having been transformed and integrated into Chinese culture in a long process of many centuries, Buddhism became one of the 'three teachings' in China, the other two being Confucian and Taoist, and did not make a significant impact on the age-old Sinocentric outlook.

The situation changed fundamentally after the mid-Tang because of the devastating An-Shi Rebellion. The Tang central government had relied on military governors in border regions to maintain its territories and effective rule, but these military commanders, many of whom were ethnically non-Han Chinese, grew too powerful to be controlled by the emperor in the capital of Chang'an, thus highlighting the problem of ethnic difference and conflict. The rebellion in mid-eighth century that started the decline of the Tang dynasty was led by An Lushan and Shi Shiming, both military leaders of Sogdian and Turkish origin. After the Tang, China during the Song dynasty was constantly perturbed by the nomadic Khitans and the Western Xia or the Tangut Empire to the north, and was robbed of much of its territories by the Liao and Jin, and eventually the Southern Song was conquered by the Mongolians, who ruled China as the Yuan dynasty from 1271 till 1368. Thus, as early as in the Song dynasty, Ge argues, 'international relations in East Asia had become very different from the time of the Tang, when the Emperor of Tang was revered as the monarch, with the authority to

confer titles and make neighbouring regions as tributary countries. Under such circumstances, East Asia started to have international relations that refused to acknowledge the Empire of China as the center.'[29] In effect, China in the Song dynasty had changed from an imperial centre ruling over 'all under heaven' to a state besieged by other states with a shrinking territory and a strong sense of the Self vis-à-vis the Other.

In many ways, China of the Song dynasty started to assume a number of features many scholars would now identify as modern or early modern. In a recent book, David Porter and a group of scholars mark the starting point of the early modern at 1100 rather than the more typical 1492 or 1500. In so doing, they want not just to 'disrupt the Eurocentric resonances' of the usual dating as 'a by-product of the Age of Discovery' and the subsequent European expansion, but also to acknowledge 'features of the late Song dynasty China in the year 1100 that bear resemblances to China in the year 1600 as well as to Italy at roughly the same time.'[30] From the perspective of economic and political history, Bin Wong also argues that China had displayed features of state-society relations much earlier than Europe: 'The ways in which nineteenth-century European states began to construct 'nations' and forge social identities for their populations through a cultural apparatus maintained by a mix of official and elite efforts is a process, the elements of which are very similar to earlier practices in China, practices fundamental in the Chinese case to the reproduction of an agrarian empire.'[31] From different perspectives, then, China in the Song dynasty is now recognized as having economic, political, and cultural features of a 'nation-state' that was to appear in Europe at a much later date in history.

For Ge Zhaoguang, however, a major concern is the change of the outlook of the Chinese at that point. Perhaps in the eyes of the Chinese of the Song dynasty, he says, 'China was not yet the large multi-ethnic community as "China," but little by little it was no longer that self-centred "all under heaven," either, which used to look down at the four barbarians with disdain. Under the pressure of the four barbarians who were getting increasingly more powerful, China of the Han ethnicity had a sense of its reduced borderlines and its precarious existence.'[32] In other words, after the 17th century, there was no more East Asia with China as the centre, but China, Japan, and Korea parted their ways, and as a result, there was nothing like a unified East Asia.

China and the Discourse on Asia

The discourse on Asia, particularly East Asia, has a complicated and chequered history, and the recognition of that complexity has some significant bearing on our understanding of the region and its intraregional relations. 'Lately many scholars, including Japanese, Korean, and Chinese, like to talk about "Asia,"' says Ge. 'Sometimes, "East Asia" becomes self-evident as a common cultural entity vis-à-vis Europe or the West.' But the notion of East Asia as a united entity is problematic, as Ge reminds us, for in the modern period, East Asia was not united, and there was a strong tendency of de-Sinicization in Japan. During the Tokugawa Shogunate, Yamaga Sokō still tried to appropriate 'China' for Japan, arguing that it was the Japanese who had inherited true Chinese culture, especially the Confucian culture,

but after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the situation became drastically different. China was no longer a name with cultural value and prestige to be claimed for one's own, but a stigma and burden to be discarded in the name of modernization. That is a period of recent history filled with drastic changes, violent conflict and wars, a history yet to be carefully studied and brought to the clarity of adequate understanding. In Asia, almost all countries pay attention to the West, but not enough to their own neighbours. Gayatri Spivak is unhappy with such 'bilateralism' found in Asian countries that 'falls into the pattern: my country or region over against "the West,"' and she calls for a consciousness of a 'continentalist', to think of Asia 'as one continent in its plurality,' and to assume a 'regional identity'.[33] That may be understood as a wish for the solidarity of the postcolonial world, but in Asia, and particularly in East Asia, the idea of a pan-Asian 'regional identity' has a heavy historical baggage that needs to be carefully unpacked and many historical problems yet to be confronted and resolved before any such solidarity can be imagined and achieved.

The Meiji Restoration in the mid- to late-19th century put an end to the Shogunate and turned Japan into the first successfully modernized country in Asia, under the rule of a deified *tenno* or 'heavenly emperor'. In the 19th and early 20th century, modernization was modelled on the West as standard or criterion, thus the Meiji Restoration was total Westernization, which prompted Japan to separate itself as a Westernized country from its Asian neighbours. In 1885, Fukuzawa Yukichi published his well-known *Datsu-A Ron* or *Escape from Asia*, which gave expression to the idea that Japan as a Westernized country must measure its progress by the distance it had achieved away from its Asian neighbours towards Europe. The strong desire to sever all ties with Asia and to join the Western powers in Europe coincided with the popularity of eugenics at the time, and there emerged the eugenic fantasy of improving the racial stock and turning Japan into a European country. That fantasy necessarily failed, so a modernized Japan returned to Asia and advocated a pan-Asianism with Japan as its unchallenged leader. Japan's victory over China in the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894 and its victory over Tsarist Russia in 1904 greatly boosted the Japanese national pride and its confidence of its military prowess, which soon developed into the colonialist ambition to dominate Asia. The expansion of Japan proceeded, as Ge Zhaoguang argues, 'under the banner of resistance to Western invasion and in pursuit of a universal Asian civilization.'[34] But the idea of a pan-Asiatic union quickly paved the way for the 'Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,' which became the pretence for the Japanese army to invade the neighbouring countries, colonize Korea and Taiwan, occupy Manchuria, and then wage a full-scale war with China in the 1930s and the early 1940s. 'The *intentional* Japanese turn away from association with Asia,' as Klaus Antoni remarks, 'became the most problematic factor in regard to Japan's position in the East Asian context, a difficulty that persists until today.'[35] Unlike Germany or Italy, Japan never had a deep soul-searching examination of its wartime behaviour during the Second World War, and many of the war crimes were covered up; therefore such a painful history in East Asia still haunts the intraregional relations between Japan and its neighbouring countries, particularly Korea and China.

In history, then, the Asiatic discourse was tainted with Japanese expansionism and militarism. Ge Zhaoguang puts it emphatically that 'Asianism was to a considerable degree Japanese, not Chinese, and the 'Asia' as the West's 'Other' was a Japanese imagined community, not a community as real presence.'[36] In recent times, when the idea of 'Asia' came to be talked about again as a counter discourse against Western hegemony, Ge's historical revaluation of the discourse of pan-Asianism makes us realize the potential danger of such a racially based idea and the inherent dichotomy between Asia and the West. Such an 'Asianism' or exclusive 'Asian values' cover up a lot of historical as well as current problems and are just as potentially dangerous and pernicious as the ideology of Eurocentrism or West-centrism.

As Ge Zhaoguang argues, after the 17th century, the ancient Sinocentric world collapsed, and there was a long history to minimize Chinese elements and influence, particularly in Japan. Antoni remarks that 'the nativistic search for a unique national character, in combination with an aggressive idea of a nation's superiority over others, in racist and/or culturalist terms, marks the core of any fascist ideology.' And that was exactly what he found in Japan since the Meiji period, because such a tendency, says Antoni, 'can best be seen in Japan's modern history in the sense of fundamental cultural and racial, superiority over China, or better, the "Chinese spirit".'[37] That may explain why, from a Chinese perspective, the postmodern and postcolonial deconstruction of China and Chineseness can be so sensitive an issue and may recall the older Japanese efforts to de-Sinicize Japan and East Asia since the Meiji Restoration.

We are now living in a very different world. China in the last 30 years has developed so rapidly in economic and other areas that it had overtaken Japan to become the world's second largest economy in 2010. The rise of China has become a hot topic and the upward trend in economic growth is still maintained. Indeed, the fact that we are having a number of essays in this issue of *European Review* dedicated to the discovery or rediscovery of China also testifies to the importance of this topic in the international arena. For a Chinese scholar, this is perhaps a most propitious time, an encouraging time to do research and make contributions to the understanding of China not only at home, but also internationally. At the same time it is also, I would like to emphasize, a time to watch out and guard against the rise of narrow-minded nationalism and ethnocentrism. Old-type Sinocentrism with the idea of China at the centre of 'all under heaven' may be long dead and gone, but it is so easy to slip down the road of self-aggrandizement and the blind confidence of the superiority of one's own culture in a time of nationalist euphoria. If there is anything useful we can draw as a lesson from the danger and disastrous consequences of Japanese nativism and chauvinism, it is the importance of being humble and opening one's eyes to the value and richness of human culture as a whole. That should be the place of China in the world at large, and that should also be the outlook of an enlightened Chinese in our world today.

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